

# Direct Communication Project

---

Paper No. 27

## The Challenge of Change

*For the Foreign Service, change is a way of life whether one is going on a first tour to Ouagadougou, transferring from Port au Prince to Paris, going to Sydney while leaving the kids behind in college, or coming back to Washington after a number of years overseas. And, for each transition there must be a period of adjustment. Some of the adjustments seem easy - others are never completely made. Some people adjust quickly to one situation and not to another. Some of the most difficult adjustments occur when the transition appears to be the easiest - when one is posted to a first world, English-speaking capital, or when one is coming "home." An understanding of what is happening when a family member or colleague is not adjusting well makes it easier to be of assistance.*

*The author, Mark Lassleben, brings a unique perspective to this subject. He is a clinical psychologist and Foreign Service spouse who has lived and worked around the world.*

### Adjustment is Work

Most social scientists agree that the success of the human race as a species can be attributed to its adaptability. Along with brain power, our ability to make transitions and adapt to new circumstances has resulted in our species being able to claim the "lion's share" under widely varying conditions throughout the world. Those of us living and working in the Foreign Service have taken this inherent strength and taxed it to the limit. We may well consider ourselves the Olympic athletes of adjustment and adaptation. We change locations, whole continents and hemispheres at a time. We change roles - vocational and social and even within the family unit. We change our cultural milieu, sometimes more often than we change our underwear. Some changes are large and obvious, like time zones or languages. But some of the minor changes, such as traffic laws or the location of the bathroom light switch, can have just as great an impact. The icing on

the cake is that we try to make all of these changes, make them quickly, and make them frequently. Foreign Service personnel and their families may be better than most people at adjusting. They had better be. However, regardless of your individual expertise as a "quick change" artist, adjustments to the various transitions take time and energy. Expenditure of energy over a period of time to accomplish a goal is the definition of work. Adjustment to change, therefore, is work - hard work.

### Difficulties in Adjustment

In the Foreign Service, we pay little attention to smooth transitions and adjustments made without difficulty. We take them for granted. After all, that is what we are "supposed to do," even if we have to do it a little faster, a little more often, and a lot more dramatically than do most people. The hard transitions and the failures to adjust are what capture our attention.

With uncharacteristic logic, psychologists call these failed or difficult transitions "adjustment disorders." Adjustment disorders come in all shapes, sizes, and flavors. They can be as varied as the individuals who experience them. As a psychologist, it is fascinating to observe exactly what combination of factors will result in an adjustment disorder in any given individual at any given time. Why can a consular officer adjust successfully to live gunfire daily in the streets outside of her office window but not make the leap to sauerkraut? Why does the wife of a senior officer who has lived in 12 different countries suddenly refuse to drive?

Adjustment disorders are common, they can occur at any age. While some individuals appear to be more "at risk" than others, nobody is immune! Psychologists define adjustment disorders as a "maladaptive reaction to any identifiable psycho-social stressor." The stressors can be single or multiple. While there is loose agreement that some types of stressors (e.g., loss of a spouse) are more severe than others (e.g., change in job title), the individual characteristics of the person involved and the symbolic meaning of the stressor will determine the ease or difficulty of the adjustment. It is important to avoid the judgmental trap of what "should" or "shouldn't" cause an adjustment disorder. The same stressor will have a very different impact on the same individual depending upon when it occurs in his/her life and what else may be happening at the same time. In an attempt to explain these idiosyncrasies of individual experience, adjustment disorders have been broken down into classifications. In this way, adaptation problems can be conceptualized and solutions can be formulated when an adjustment proves to be difficult.

## Changes in Mood

Two subtypes of adjustment difficulties involve changes in mood; people become anxious or depressed, sometimes both. The best "remedy" for a person who is anxious is calmness. Recreation, decreased levels of stimulation, and supportive relationships (both personal and professional), can be helpful. What we say about the stressor can make matters better or much, much worse. Convincing oneself that "This is the worst post in Africa" will have a dramatically different effect than admitting, "I'm glad I won't be here forever." Depression can be resolved by gradually increasing the person's activity levels and providing reliable and meaningful "payoffs" for energy expended. For example, a depressed person can be literally overwhelmed by the task of getting out of bed in the morning and needs recognition and support for just getting up. Once up, s/he can then tackle shaving or putting on make-up. Cooking a meal or going out for coffee are steps further down the line. There may be many small steps before any "major accomplishments" are achieved. The goal is to help get the depressed person to a level of functioning so that the naturally occurring personal "payoffs" support ongoing activity and efforts.

Depressed people need to improve their self-esteem and to be reminded what it is they do well. Aerobic exercise is typically helpful, particularly when done routinely. The value of supportive, interpersonal relationships cannot be overemphasized. However, they may be difficult for a new person in a new place to find, especially if other family members are having their own adjustment difficulties.

## Changes in Behavior

Another type of adjustment difficulty involves changes in conduct - antisocial and/or reckless behavior not typical of the individual in his/her general approach to life. A first time extramarital affair by a spouse or the arrest of a teenage son would be classic examples. Disturbed conduct can be most distressing to friends, family, and associates. It calls for a delicate balance of limit-setting on the one hand, and compassionate understanding on the other. Family members should remind themselves that this is a passing phase rather than a personality change for the worse. Clear and firm limit-setting prevents bad deeds from becoming bad habits.

## Physical Complaints

While changes in behavior are more common with men, adjustment difficulties with physical complaints are more common with women. Headaches, back pain, gastric tract distress, and general malaise "for which no physical cause can be found" are common. Frequently, these people are "talking through their bodies." They may be the good soldiers who haven't complained about the pollution, malaria, terrorism, or separation from the kids. As with changes in behavior, friends and family need to provide support and understanding, balanced against limit-setting. The person should not be allowed to become an invalid; neither should s/he be accused of malingering. "Talking it out" provides an alternative to the physical symptoms, but the listener must be prepared with patience, understanding and empathy in large doses. Often an impartial ally such as a therapist, school counselor, or Embassy nurse may be needed.

## Social Withdrawal

Normally social and outgoing individuals may avoid other people and social situations when stressed. People who are typically shy or reserved and people functioning in a culture outside their own are susceptible to social withdrawal. It can often be a "first tour" reaction for an individual with a "hometown" background. Employees are usually forced into social situations at work and the children meet friends at school. However, spouses and family members at home often do not have this social infrastructure. It is surprisingly easy for family members to get lost in the shuffle of a large or medium sized post (or in the hubbub of modern American suburbs) and, in effect, "fall off the face of the earth." This is a serious problem as the individual is systematically avoiding the best treatment (social interaction) and the most powerful set of tools (new friends) available. In order to recover, the individual must face whatever fears or inhibitions s/he has, and deliberately go into social interacting situations.

It is helpful when the individual can choose which social situations to take part in and to "control the dose" (i.e., leave when s/he wants to). Total avoidance of social situations, however, is a mistake. Small frequent steps work much better than occasional large leaps. Weekly play groups or casual brief contacts are typically better than the Fourth of July picnic or the Marine Ball. Having a clear role or something to do in the social situation can provide a distraction and reduce anxiety. Frequently, a withdrawn person will go to a social event if they are "needed" whereas they might not go on their own behalf.

### Changes in Job Performance

Sometimes adjustment difficulty symptoms can show up in the job or academic arena. "A" students receive "C's" or fail classes. Previously effective employees do not turn in solid work or they do not work as efficiently as before. Usually, if bosses, teachers, employees, and students realize that this is a passing phase, it can be a calming and reassuring thought. This awareness, though, may not be so quickly available when you are the one struggling with the situation. Focusing exclusively on the symptom can make matters worse. Remember that the individual is showing problems at work or school because s/he is having trouble adjusting. The adjustment problem should be the focus of attention, not the impaired work or academic output. If the adjustment to the

particular stressor or transition can be facilitated, the symptom will take care of itself. Specific goal setting with a regular measurement of movement towards those goals can be a helpful technique.

The lore of the Foreign Service is rich with stories of transition and adaptation. They range from heartbreaking to side-splitting. All of us can tell stories from our own experience, and most of us can remember being in one of the categories described above.. Knowing about the adjustment process, and that we are a population "at risk," may open us up to sharing our experiences and being sensitive to friends and colleagues who, from time to time, get stuck in mid-transition.

W. Mark Lassleben, Ph.D.

## Don't Leave Home Without Them: Papers to Handcarry

This list of papers and documents should be **handcarried** during any move. Keeping them in a portable file box makes them easy to collect in an emergency as well as for a scheduled move.

### Employment Records

- ◆ Personnel Action forms (SF-50s)
- ◆ Resumes and sample cover letters
- ◆ Up-to-date copies of government applications
- ◆ Recent Earnings and Leave statements
- ◆ Performance Evaluation Reports
- ◆ Honors, awards, good performance citations
- ◆ Transcripts from colleges and universities
- ◆ Letters of recommendation
- ◆ Letters verifying community service
- ◆ Credentials, licenses, verifications for skills
- ◆ Writing samples
- ◆ Names and addresses of personal references
- ◆ Copies of security clearance forms
- ◆ Names of contacts for job search network

### School Records for Each Child

- ◆ All transcripts from previous schools
- ◆ Copies of standardized test scores
- ◆ Profiles/brochures from last school
- ◆ List of textbooks used in last grade
- ◆ Recommendations from principals, counselors, teachers
- ◆ Copies of representative student work

### Financial/Personal Records

- ◆ Medical/dental records, prescriptions, immunization cards
- ◆ Birth, naturalization, and marriage certificates
- ◆ Driver's license, auto insurance, title, and reg.
- ◆ Personal checks, registers, bank statements
- ◆ Credit cards, bills, and financial records
- ◆ Contact information for doctors, dentists, and lawyers
- ◆ Household effects inventory
- ◆ Household goods insurance policy

## Reentry Resources

Moving to Washington can be the most difficult transition of all. These offices can help.

**Family Liaison Office (M/DGP/FLO)**  
**Room 1212A, Department of State**  
**Tel: 202-647-1076; Fax: 202-647-1670**

FLO provides information on Washington area schools and employment.

**Overseas Briefing Center (OBC)**  
**4000 Arlington Boulevard**  
**Room E2121, NFATC**  
**Tel: 703-302-7268; Fax: 703-302-7452**

OBC provides information on housing, transportation, entertainment, animals, child care, plus offering reentry workshops.

**Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF)**  
**PO Box 39185**  
**Washington, DC 20016**

FSYF offers reentry activities to help teens through the transition to Washington.

**Association of American**  
**Foreign Service Women (AAFSW)**  
**5125 MacArthur Blvd. NW, Suite #36**  
**Washington, DC 20016**  
**Tel: 202-362-6512; Fax: 202-362-6587**

**AAFSW Housing Office**  
**Room 1254, Department of State**  
**Tel: 202-647-3573**

The Housing Office has information on temporary housing, metrobus/rail, maps, driver's licenses, lease forms, diplomatic clause samples, and housesitting. Information on their child care referral network, foreign-born spouse network, women in transition group, and an adult education loan is available from the AAFSW Office.